

OPEN AND SHUT?





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The State of Open Access

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Basement Interviews
OA Interviews

Wednesday, August 17, 2011

The Open Access Interviews: WebmedCentral's Kamal Mahawar

In any discussion about scholarly communication today two thorny issues quickly emerge: the so-called access problem, and the problem of declining peer review standards. Kamal Mahawar, co-founder and CEO of a new web platform for publishing biomedical research called WebmedCentral, believes he has a solution to both problems. WebmedCentral, however, is not without its critics.

The access problem afflicting the research community is essentially an issue of affordability. Researchers submit a paper to a publisher, who then invites other researchers to assess it for quality and value. Assuming it is deemed to be adequate the paper is then published in a journal. To fund this process publishers sell subscriptions to their journals. Research institutions buy these subscriptions to ensure that their researchers have access to all relevant research being done around the world.

As library budgets have declined, however, research institutions have struggled to find the necessary money to pay for all the subscriptions their faculty require, depriving researchers of access to more and more research — a phenomenon known as the serials crisis.

Advocates of open-access publishing (as distinct from self-archiving) believe that the answer to this access/affordability problem is for researchers to abandon publishing in subscription journals and publish in OA journals instead. Rather than imposing charges for access (subscriptions), OA journals levy a publication fee, or "article-processing charge" on authors, or more usually their institutions. This enables publishers to make the papers they publish freely available on the Web, and so provide unfettered access to them.

The problem with OA publishing, however, is that the publication fees are far from cheap — around \$1,350 to \$3,000 per paper. Consequently, not all researchers have access to the necessary funds. While some OA publishers offer waivers for those without the wherewithal, this is generally done on a case-by-case basis, and the practice could very well be discontinued at some point in the future. If it was, indigent authors could find themselves unable to get their research published, particularly authors based in the developing world.

Raghavendra Gadagkar, a researcher at the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, made this point eloquently in a letter to *Nature* in 2008. He concluded that author-pays OA, "does more harm than good in the developing world".

Decline in quality

Meanwhile, there is a growing conviction that the quality of peer review is declining. This concern was addressed recently by the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee. In its report, the Select Committee stated: "the integrity of the peer-review process can only ever be as robust as the integrity of the people involved"; and it concluded that "oversight of research integrity in the UK is unsatisfactory."

Kamal Mahawar — whose day job is Consultant General and Bariatric Surgeon at City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Trust in the North East of England — believes the answer to the present crisis in scholarly communication lies in making research papers open access, but without imposing a publication fee on authors. More radically, he believes that any attempt to undertake pre-publication review should be abandoned.

Mahawar's reasoning is that since the bulk of the costs associated with publishing research papers arises from the process of managing peer review, and the quality of the reviewing is in any case open to question, pre-publication review has become an

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Open Access: "Information wants to be free"?

(A print version of this eBook is

available here) Earlier this year I was invited to discuss with Georgia Institute of Technology libraria...



P2P: The very core of the world to come In the first part of this interview Michel

Bauwens , the creator of The Foundation for P2P

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Preservation Dove

Medical OA in Russia Radical OA Almost OA

HEFCE Frontiers

unnecessary tax on the research community.

All that is needed, he adds, is to provide a low-cost publishing platform, let researchers post their papers on it, and then have independent researchers from other institutions review the papers — a process known as post-publication peer review.

As Mahawar put it in a written submission to the Science & Technology Committee inquiry, "There is widespread belief that pre-publication peer review, ineffective and harmful as it may be, is a necessary evil. I believe time has now come for scientific community to discard pre-publication peer review and concentrate on reinforcing post publication peer review."

Of course there is no shortage of people happy to share with you their views on peer review. What is different about Mahawar is that he has put his money where his mouth: a year ago, with a group of colleagues, he launched WebmedCentral as an open-access post-publication peer review platform for biomedical science.

WebmedCentral promises to publish all papers submitted to it within 48 hours without reviewing them, and then help authors solicit reviews for the papers *post factum*.

Suspicion and criticism

To Mahawar's disappointment, however, the research community has reacted to WebmedCentral with a degree of suspicion and criticism. It did not help that there were initially no details available on the site indicating who owns and manages the service.

Amongst other things, this led to speculation that WebmedCentral was some kind of marketing channel to enable the pharmaceutical industry promote its products. There were also complaints that its publication model would "flood the market" with unreviewed papers and "threaten the current models (including PLoS ONE)".

In January, *PLoS ONE* associate editor Matt Hodgkinson posted a detailed and critical review of WebmedCentral on his blog *Journalology*. Many of the articles on the site, he concluded, "are unpublishable in any biomedical journal"; and he suggested that, given its copyright policy, it would be misleading to call WebmedCentral "open access".

In a separate post, Hodgkinson criticised WebmedCentral for not publishing its ownership details. Having discovered these for himself in the Companies House database, Hodgkinson posted them on his blog, and ended by saying: "Drs Mahawar, Malviya, Kejariwal, Mr Jain, you should be proud of launching a site that aims to reform biomedical publishing. Why hide away?"

It was not a promising start for a new venture. But Mahawar and his colleagues believe that their cause is a worthy one so they have persisted. And to their credit they have responded to the criticism and made a number of changes, including publishing ownership details on the site and updating their copyright policy. They are also currently looking at how they can introduce an additional quality control layer on the site so that readers can, as Mahawar puts it, more easily judge "which sections have been found by reviewers and faculty to be of a better quality".

Mahawar has also responded to Hodgkinson's review. In his response he denies that it is misleading to call WebmedCentral open access, and he suggests that Hodgkinson's review may have been too judgemental.

He is also unrepentant about publishing what Hodgkinson called "fringe science". As he put it to me, "That some of these articles would be considered unpublishable in the current system is the whole point of WebmedCentral".

He added, "It is inevitable that early on we will attract submissions which have not found a place elsewhere but gradually we hope to move the emphasis away from the act of publication to science, and then the quality of submissions should improve."

Another obstacle the service faces is that researchers have shown themselves generally reluctant to commit time to post-publication reviewing, a point that post-publication review advocate and former *BMJ* editor Richard Smith has had to concede.

Put this point to Mahawar, however, and he responds: "We feel that other journals have been distracted by pre-publication peer review and were thus not able to give post-publication peer review much attention. Since this is our sole review model, we take it very seriously and are likely to be more successful as a consequence."

But the greatest obstacle WebmedCentral faces is that it still lacks a business model. As one researcher commented on FriendFeed, "I don't see a viable business model

Alternatives, explained why he believes the var...



PLOS CEO Alison Mudditt discusses new OA agreement with the University of

California

The Public Library of Science (PLOS) and the University of California (UC) have today announced a two-year agreement designed to make...



The Open Access Interviews: Publisher MDPI Headquartered in Basel.

Switzerland, the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, or more usually MDPI, is an open access publisher...



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Medical Press

Please note the postscript to this interview here The openaccess publisher Dove Medical Press has a controversial past and I have writ...



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In calling for research papers to be made freely available open access advocates promised that doing so would lead to a simpler, less cos...



The Open Access Interviews: OMICS Publishing Group's Srinu

Babu Gedela

****Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...



Robin Osborne on the state of Open Access: Where are we, what still needs to be done?

One of a series exploring the current state of Open Access (OA), the Q&A below is with Robin Osborne, Professor of Ancient History a...



Community
Action
Publishing:
Broadening the
Pool

We are today seeing growing dissatisfaction with the pay-to-publish model for open access. As this requires authors (or their funders or ins...

and no evidence of an active reviewing community. Lot of things like this have been tried and none succeeded yet. People are not willing to submit good work to such unrecognised systems. Would love to see something like this succeed but I don't think this will be it."

Comments like this also do not faze Mahawar. "We believe that if we provide a service which the community values, money will not be too difficult to find," he told me. "We are exploring all options including philanthropic donation, advertisements, and angel investment for continued funding of this venture."

The good news is that post-publication peer review is gaining favour — helped no doubt by the perceived success of Faculty 1000 (although it should be noted that F1000 only reviews papers that have already been traditionally reviewed and published in a regular journal).

On the topic of post-publication review the Science & Technology Committee Report remarks, "While pre-publication peer review continues to play an important role, the growth of post-publication peer review and commentary represents an enormous opportunity for experimentation ... We encourage the prudent use of online tools for post-publication review and commentary as a means of supplementing prepublication review."

In other words, for the moment post-publication review is seen as an adjunct to prepublication review. Whether it will eventually replace traditional pre-publication peer review, and if so how it will be facilitated and funded, remains for the moment unclear. In the meantime, however, experiments like WebmedCentral are surely to be welcomed

Below Mahawar answers some specific questions about WebmedCentral.



Kamal Mahawar

Q: Can you clarify when WebmedCentral was launched, what your position is at WebmedCentral, and who else is involved?

A: The portal www.webmedcentral.com (commonly known as WebmedCentral) was officially launched in August 2010. It is owned by a company called Webmed Limited, which is registered in England.

I am a shareholder, director and CEO of the company. The others involved are my friends Deepak Kejariwal (shareholder, director and chairman), Mr Ajay Malviya (shareholder and director) and Mr Manish Jain (shareholder, director, and CFO).

In addition we have a technical team based in the US, UK, and India running our day-to-day affairs. We also have a number of scientists helping us as advisory board members, faculty, and scholarly reviewers.

Q: You say on the site that "Biomedical publishing needs radical changes to empower authors, reviewers and readers." Can you say more about why you launched WebmedCentral and how you hope it will address the changes you feel are necessary?

A: Biomedical publishing is a multibillion dollar industry that thrives on two basic types of publishing model: reader-pays (funded by libraries or readers) and authorpays (funded by research agencies or authors). The money involved is significant and effectively excludes a large section of the scientific community from participating in academic debates, as they simply cannot afford it. The developing world is especially disadvantaged.

On probing further, it becomes clear that the costs arise mainly from pre-publication peer review. Journals organise this reviewing on behalf of the community and they charge the community for doing so. It does seem rather ironic that the same scientists who write articles for free and review them for free have to pay to actually read them (or publish them with open access journals).

Furthermore pre-publication peer review as the gate keeper of science has come



Open Access: What should the priorities be today? This year marks

the 15 th anniversary of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI), the meeting that led to the launch of the open acce...

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under increasing criticism and scrutiny. Post-publication peer review, on the other hand, aims to generate a debate around every published work and each manuscript as if it were a work in progress, with constant monitoring by the community and updating by authors.

WebmedCentral is trying to build a dynamic platform where publication is not considered the end point of scientific communication, but the beginning. This is backed by raw data, free commentary and reviews and author interaction. We will enable these facilities on our portal and it will then be up to the scientific community to use it.

Our model uses the latest internet technologies to facilitate publication. It will allow every scientist, from any part of the world, who has anything to say to express it freely without any fear of rejection by peers. Peers can make their comments post publication if they so wish.

This approach allows us to keep our publication costs very low and delays are practically non-existent (articles are mostly published within 48 hours). We are trying to build a fair, low cost, efficient platform for scientific communication.

Misleading?

Q: Earlier this year PLoS ONE associate editor Matt Hodgkinson wrote a critical review of WebmedCentral. Do you feel that review was unfair, inaccurate or unbalanced in any way? (One could argue that PLoS ONE is a competitor to WebmedCentral: perhaps Hodgkinson should have added a statement to his review indicating his affiliations?)

A: Please find attached here our response to Matt Hodgkinson's blog posting. I have sent it to Matt as well for him to post it on his blog.

Q: In his review, Hodgkinson referred to a number of contradictory messages on the WebmedCentral site about copyright and concluded, "Calling WebmedCentral 'open access' would be misleading." Does he have a point?

A: We have clarified this point in the attached document. WebmedCentral is open access and the terminology is not at all misleading.

Q: Hodgkinson also said that the site includes fringe science and that many of the articles on the site are "unpublishable in any biomedical journal". Would you agree?

A: That some of these articles would be considered unpublishable in the current system is the whole point of WebmedCentral. We do not wish to judge articles before publication. It is inevitable that early on we will attract submissions which have not found a place elsewhere but gradually we hope to move the emphasis away from the act of publication to science, and then the quality of submissions should improve.

If you agree that making a commodity scarce increases its value, by making publication a non-issue, we seek to take the emphasis away from the act of publication to the science itself. In such an environment, an author has nothing to gain by publishing substandard research under their name, and everything to lose. It is our belief that serious authors looking to enhance their reputation will find this freedom of expression empowering, whereas casual authors will soon bring disrepute upon themselves.

Q: As I understand it, to address the above point you intend to add an extra quality control layer on the site. Presumably that would mean that the fringe science would remain, but there would be a second layer on top of that which would include some more traditional peer review services?

A: The additional layer being planned would make it easier for a reader to judge which sections have been found by reviewers and faculty to be of a better quality. It would still not prevent anybody from publishing what they want as that is our core principle and we do not wish to compromise it.

Intermittent intervention

Q: How do you normally seek reviews of uploaded papers, or are authors expected to organise their own reviews?

A: Reviews are primarily organised by authors, but WebmedCentral intervenes intermittently and invites additional reviewers. We also have our own scholarly reviewers and a team of faculty helping in this task.

Q: I have had complaints that WebmedCentral "spams" researchers asking them to review papers. Would you accept that charge, or are researchers

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1,676 Pageviews Oct. 18th - Nov. 18th





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simply overly sensitive to such issues?

A: As I say, WebmedCentral intermittently invites reviewers to generate debate around published work. We all (including myself) receive such requests from journals all the time and that is mainly due to the fact that number of articles published is increasing geometrically whereas the number of reviewers is not.

WebmedCentral's answer to this problem is, as I mentioned, to move the emphasis away from the act of publication per se, which we believe is responsible for the massive rise in the number of publications.

Q: There have been a number of attempts to shift scholarly publishing from a pre-publication review model to post-publication reviewing — including, of course, the attempts by PLoS ONE. To date, however, it has proved very difficult to attract much in the way of post-publication commentary. Where it does occur it tends to take place not on the site where the paper was published, but elsewhere on the Web — on, for instance, researchers' blogs, and via Twitter etc. Why do you think this is, and how do you think sites like WebmedCentral can encourage more commentary on the papers themselves.

A: We have already been more successful in generating post-publication debate than many others and we hope to be able to improve upon our performance in future by several planned interventions.

We feel that other journals have been distracted by pre-publication peer review and were thus not able to give post-publication peer review much attention. Since this is our sole review model, we take it very seriously and are likely to be more successful as a consequence.

Q: As I understand it, WebmedCentral has published 558 papers since it was launched. Are you pleased with this figure or disappointed? What are your expectations for submissions going forward?

A: We are very pleased with what WebmedCentral has achieved in less than a year. It is much beyond our expectations. We expect to grow by 100% every year for the next few years in terms of hits to our website, growing our user base, and growing the number of articles submitted and reviews posted.

Q: Unless I am mistaken, the only income you receive from WebmedCentral is from the premium upload service you offer (which costs \$50), which I assume is minimal. You and your partners must however have invested (and continue to invest) considerable sums of money in the site. Is WebmedCentral a philanthropic project, or is it a commercial venture that has yet to develop a business model?

A: We believe that if we provide a service which the community values, money will not be too difficult to find. So far, the costs are being met by shareholder investments. We are exploring all options including philanthropic donation, advertisements, and angel investment for continued funding of this venture.

With hindsight

Q: I believe that Matt Hodgkinson's review of WebmedCentral was sparked partly by the fact that there was no indication on the site of who owns the company behind it. There are a number of OA publishers whose ownership is obscure, and whose business practices many believe to be suspect. You have now added ownership details to WebmedCentral. Do you regret not having done so from the beginning?

A: We were hoping that the community would take our venture at face value and it would not matter who was behind it. We were also trying to avoid any undue publicity which would inevitably bring potential disruption to our routine professional lives.

However it soon became evident that some scientists were becoming suspicious that we had links with the pharmaceutical industry and other vested interests that we are trying to hide.

With hindsight, it would possibly have been better to reveal our names from the outset. However as Hodgkinson found out earlier this year, this information has been available in the public domain throughout for anyone who really wanted to find out.

Posted by Richard Poynder at 16:56



Labels: Gold OA, Open Access, Peer Review, Select Committee



CONFLATING OPEN ACCESS WITH EXPERIMENTS ON PEER REVIEW

Google "peer review reform hypothesis testing" or ("open access" "free it from peer review") and you will see that a lot of water has already flowed under this bridge in the past decade:

The immediate and urgent objective of the Open Access (OA) movement is to free access to the peer-reviewed literature, such as it is -- not to free it from peer review, such as it is. Experiments on improving peer review are always welcome, but until and unless such experiments turn out to demonstrate that they are capable of providing (1) a literature that is reliably of a quality at least equal to that of the existing peer-reviewed literature as well as being (2) sustainable and scalable, they have nothing to do with the immediate (and urgent) practical goal of freeing access to the peer-reviewed literature, such as it is.

The purpose of pre-publication peer review is (i) to provide advance quality control to protect authors, before they expose their work publicly, (ii) to provide advance quality control (not potluck) to protect potential researcher-users, before they invest their scarce reading time or their precious research time and resources into trying to build upon unsound results, (3) and to provide the the public with advance protection from potential harm from unsound results (not potluck). Ask yourself how this advance protection is possible "post-publication," when unsound results have already been "published"? (Would you want your food's or medicine's quality to be tested post-consumption too?)

Unrefereed papers are unrefereed papers, whether or not they have been self-posted publicly by the author. In the research community, at least, "publication" means something rather different: It means the paper has been peer reviewed and found to meet the quality standards for which a journal has established a public track-record.

Post-"publication" peer review is hence a bit of a contradiction in terms: Open Access does not mean redefining public posting of unrefereed papers as "publication" and then hoping for the best...

Stevan Harnad,

EnablingOpenScholarship

August 18, 2011 2:02 pm 🗂

Anonymous said...

- 1. Is there any copy editing done on the papers? What happens if a manuscript has paragraphs that are so badly written, they are incomprehensible? (There are more and more of these, e.g. from China, India, Iran...) Do these stay as they are? If not, who decides what to change and what happens next?
- 1. How are the PDF files created from author submissions? Is the process automatic? If so how reliable is this? If manual, who pays for this? I did register and sign up and tried to look at author instructions but the page is not available.
- 3. Is there any semantic mark-up at any point? The world is moving towards structured documents which can be read on any device and XML archives that can be searched and used intelligently. This process costs money (although not much). Is WMC going to create XML documents at any point in future?

August 19, 2011 7:11 am



Richard Poynder said...

Kamal Mahawar has asked me to post this response to the above two comments:

1. I thank Dr. Harnad for his comments. I have already clarified these issues elsewhere and we at WebmedCentral believe that a false quality assurance is a bigger problem than an open admission that quality is open to debate.

The current system is very arbitrary and time consuming. Moreover there is no dearth of journals which will publish almost anything in the name of peer reviewed literature, as long as this helps their business.

I agree that the word "publication" carries a very significant meaning for the research community. This is precisely what we at WebmedCentral are aspiring to alter. We want to make "publication" not an end but a means to an end.

In this context, one would find it easier to use the word "publication" in its wider sense, to imply the expression of any scientific finding. Such an act does not have to and should not wait for peer approval.

Scientists do not need artificial barriers erected in the name of "refereed literature" and then removed in the name of so called open access, as Dr. Harnad defines it.

The problems with author-pays open access journals are known to us all. It may actually exclude the very people it seeks to include. Removing the barriers of pre-publication peer review, and publishing everything in a climate of constant debate and manuscript improvement, would yield us the true benefits of "open access".

Finally, the success of our venture will be judged by community participation. Initial results are extremely encouraging and we at WebmedCentral are confident that we can provide a low cost "inclusive" platform for scientists to share their experiences.

If any scientist has ideas to improve our portal, we welcome personal communication from them and would even welcome such enthusiasts onto our advisory board.

2. Thanks Kaveh for your patience. Manuscripts and pdfs are generated using a semi-automatic process with manual input.

We are working constantly to make the user experience easier and our technical team is constantly working on improving the presentation of articles. In the near future we will be creating and archiving XML compatible documents.

Even if some poorly phrased paragraph escapes into the "published" domain, it would not cause a major problem. Others can always point them out, and authors are then free to ask us to make minor changes to the article on their behalf. For major changes, they can submit revised versions of the manuscript.

We also have a "report abuse" functionality where any of these problems can be flagged to us and we will then request authors to amend sections to make them more readable.

August 22, 2011 5:40 pm

Abhijit Bal said...

1. Is there a benefit?

With so many journals around, both good and poor work get published. Top researchers configure their spectrum in a way so as to exclude journals at the lower end of quality. But with so many journals, almost everyone already has a voice albeit with some degree of quality control, which is a good thing. The post-publication only model would also allow even the most poor papers to get published. But what does that achieve? Why waste the time of the readers and also the reviewers and the faculty members who must review even the poor end of the poor papers (which currently do not find space even in poor journals) in order to find good ones?

2. The "Hawthorne" effect and the interaction between authors and reviewers

Hawthorne effect refers to the improvement in subject behaviour when apsects of the behaviour are measured. The fact that there is a danger of rejection improves the quality of science which subsequently improves the manuscript. The proposed model removes this barrier which could perhaps lead to sub-optimal quality being delivered. Also, in the current model the authors must respond to the reviewer's criticism but in the proposed model, the authors don't need to. Moreover, they might be seen to respond and yet the responses may be suboptimal. The deficiencies would be spotted by researchers with a deep interest in the subject but not necessarily by readers interested only in the factual data. Although this is true even in the current model (e.g. how often readers go through "letters to the editor"), at least the original manuscripts can be

trusted to have undergone some degree of filtering.

My own work on webmedcentral showed that not even one out of 26 papers that were critically reviewed in webmedcentral elicited a response from the authors. Disappointingly, the interview claimed that webmedcentral generates debate better than many others. This claim is exaggeratd if not false and misleading. At present there is no debate in webmedcentral. There is plenty of scope for debate though and it is well set for it.

3. Quality control

The real issue surrounding quality control has little to do with a prospective deluge of poorly written manuscripts from people whose sole objective is to increase the number of papers (which would over time take care of itself because publications would cease to have value, or so one hopes). The real issue is quality control of work undertaken by people with intellectual conflict of interest i.e. work whose conclusion has been derived before evidence has been gathered. Pre-publication peer review cuts down on manuscripts with heavy subjective influence.

August 26, 2011 10:35 pm i

Abhijit Bal said...

4. Cost

Proponents of post-publication only model claim to cut down on cost. But the cost also lies in the time that the readers would need to spend on every manuscript hampered by an inability to configure a viable filter as all manuscripts start at a level field. The answer to this is strong faculty reviews but that also takes time and that too is arbitrary like the current process. If until then it is best not to read the work, then why bother publishing them before reviews?

5. A better model?

Post publication commenting has seen good uptake in recent years in popular journals (e.g. rapid response section in BMJ). Thus, a hybrid system is already available. If authors feel toned down by the reviewers, they themselves could respond post publication (authors have generally not self-responded in the existing rapid response section in the BMJ may be because the reviews were good for all the criticisms they face or may be respecting an established decorum). The hybrid system filters manuscripts as well as allows debate. How is the hybrid model inferior to the post-publication review only model?

Conclusion

The issue is not merely "people publishing more" (and hence the emphasis on redundant papers) but rather "more people publishing" (as the developing world gets connected). It is right to say that only the extent of community participation in the coming years would show the true value of this model. Biomedical scientists need a culture change before they can embrace such models but even then a few questions remain. Biomedical science is closer to the society than, say, physics, and therefore there is a great deal of temptation to say something and the consequences of bad science are infinitely severe. I think the postpublication only model is a good attempt but there is scope for improvement. The interview claims that giving everyone to voice their opinion is a core philosophy but much more than that, it is a core compulsion if the cost is to be kept low. Out of more than 500 papers in webmedcentral, most are case reports, reviews, and opinions. Quality control increases reader confidence. Kamal Mahawar should have been invited by the UK parliament enquiry where an honest debate would have improved a system that is need of repair.

Declarations: I am a friend of Kamal Mahawar but not involved in the activities of Webmedcentral.

August 26, 2011 10:36 pm 🔠

jayukids (JRGohil) said...

i have read the articles and looking at the invited reviewers; I feel they 1) should not be residents working under the author in the department.

2) invited reviewer should not be from the same institution.

August 26, 2011 10:51 pm 🛅

Anonymous said...

I wanted to point out a couple inaccuracies in your opening statement to the interview.

"OA journals levy a publication fee, or "article-processing charge" on authors, or more usually their institutions. This enables publishers to make the papers they publish freely available on the Web, and so provide unfettered access to them."

Most OA journals do not levy APCs. The DOAJ now includes whether or not journals charge APCs in the metadata they make available for analysis. For the 6,919 journals listed when I pulled the metadata about a month ago, only 1,825 or 26.4% charged APCs.

Using BMC as the basis for what APCs generally cost is also somewhat misleading. APCs in the biomedical field tend to be relatively high. Table 2 from a recent study Bo-Christer Bjork I and I compleeted paints a very different picture.

http://www.openaccesspublishing.org/apc/

It was based on only 69 journals but a much more representative sample of the breadth of journals that charge APCs. We plan to do a much more comprehensive study but it is clear there are many publisher that charge far less than \$1350 USD.

David Solomon dsolomon@msu.edu

September 16, 2011 1:26 pm 🛅



Richard Poynder said...

Dear David.

Thank you for this, and for pointing me to your paper, which I found very interesting. It is a useful addition to the work being undertaken to try and map out the OA publishing landscape.

You are right to question what I said. Let me respond to both the issues you raise, but first I would like to make a general point: I perhaps did not make it clear enough, but I was commenting in the context of biomedical journals (That said, my comments were made preparatory to an interview with the CEO of a biomedical service, WebmedCentral).

It was for this reason that I took the BMC table as a guide, and it was for this reason that I assumed authors choosing to publish in an OA journal would likely be asked to pay an APC — unless they were able to obtain a waiver.

1. With regard to your point that most OA journals do not levy APCs: I am aware that this is a claim made frequently by OA advocates, and I have no data to challenge that claim. So maybe I should have mentioned it (I have, by the way, addressed the point elsewhere).

However, as you acknowledge in your paper, OA publishing is in a dynamic state. Indeed you say, "Scientific Journal publishing is in a state of change, with Open Access journals rapidly increasing their market share. Most of this growth is occurring in established or newly founded journals using article processing charges to fund operation."

Elsewhere you say, "Publication fees or article processing charges (APCs) have become the predominant means for funding professional OA publishing ... [and our findings] ... suggest publishing funded through APCs is likely to continue to grow."

I assume, therefore, that we could both agree that, whatever the current situation, the way in which OA publishing is funded will change, and the number of journals that charge APCs will grow over time. (The figure you cite of 26.4% OA journals levying APCs today is, I think, higher than the 2005 Kaufman-Wills Group study).

I would also quote the words of Harvard's Stuart Shieber. In announcing the launch of COPE, Shieber said that currently "[O]nly a minority of the extant open-access journals actually charge processing fees."

He then added, "Nonetheless, processing fees are likely to be an important revenue model for open-access journals, as they scale beyond the tiny fraction of overall journals that they currently constitute;

processing fees are the only revenue source that inherently scales directly with the publishing services provided by a journal."

2. As concerns your second point that using BMC as the basis for what APCs generally cost is somewhat misleading, because APCs in the biomedical field tend to be relatively high: I agree but, again, I was writing in the context of biomedical publishing.

I think it would also be fair to say that biomedical subscription journals tend to be more expensive than subscription journals in other fields. For that reason, I do not think that the issue you raise changes the more general point I was trying to make: Scholarly publishing is currently in the grip of a serious affordability problem, and it seems unlikely that openaccess publishing will resolve that problem.

It is with this in mind that the CEO of WebmedCentral, Kamal Mahawar, argues that since most of the costs incurred in publishing scholarly papers arise from the process of conducting peer review, and the quality of that peer review is increasingly open to doubt, then one obvious way of addressing the affordability problem is to dispense with pre-publication peer review.

By the way, one area of research where I believe some useful work could be done would be to try and establish how those journals that do not charge an APC do fund themselves and — more importantly — whether that funding source offers a viable long-term solution.

September 17, 2011 4:27 pm 🛅

David Solomon said...

Richard,

You are welcome and thank you for your response.

It has been awhile since I read the Kaufman-Wills Group study but I believe they got their data from surveying a variety of publishers. The data I used was metadata from the DOAJ database. They provide their full database of journals in a format that can be easily analyzed.

http://www.doaj.org/doaj? func=loadTempl&templ=faq&uiLanguage=en#metadata

This includes whether or not the journal charges publication fees. While the data is self-report from publishers and the DOAJ does not include every OA journal, the DOAJ data is probably about as accurate an estimate as you can find.

Your point on the choice of BMC is well taken. I just wanted to point out that there are publishers and a few publish in the biomedical field that charge a lot less.

I agree there is a need to explore how journals that do not charge APCs are funded. That is an excellent idea for a survey study.

One side point on the interview. I operated an OA journal (Medical Education Online) with essentially no resources other than my and a colleagues time for 12 years before finally going with a professional OA publisher and charging APCs.

Operating the peer review process took a lot of resources but as noted by Dr. Mahawar those are donated by the reviewers and often the editors. With excellent software like OJS and services like the Scholarly Exchange, managing the the peer-review process does not have to be very expensive. Conducting peer review is the resource intensive process but it does not take fees.

What I have found to be costly and take publishing professionals to do well is all the ancillary work such as assigning DOIs, copy editing, typesetting, and creating XML versions so articles can be permanently archived. We can argue which of these ancillary services are really necessary but what surprises me is the focus of the discussion is always on peer review. That was what we could do, and I think we do it well, without a lot of help from professional publishers and the need to charge APCs or subscription fees.

The other point that often gets lost in the discussion is that peer review is

not just about selecting what gets published. Manuscripts are rarely published as they are originally submitted. The feedback from reviewers and the revision process results in a better manuscript often a much better manuscript.

Post publication review provides a different result. It is useful when someone is interested in the topic and wants to read the whole thread of discussion.

The literature is also used as reference material. In that case, traditional peer-review which results in better written manuscripts that are clearer and have incorporated the feedback from reviewers and are probably more useful to the reader.

September 18, 2011 7:15 am



Richard Poynder said...

Dear David.

Thank you for your further comment. Three things occur to me.

First, whatever the true cost of peer review, the key issue surely is whether the quality of the output justifies the cost of the input? I am not sure how one goes about establishing that, but there does appear to be a growing feeling that as the number of published papers grows, and the pressure on researchers' time increases, so the quality of peer review is deteriorating.

Second, on the costs of the ancillary work associated with publishing — assigning DOIs, copy editing, typesetting, and so on: Some researchers appear to believe that in an Internet-enabled publishing environment much of this work is no longer necessary.

See for instance Knowledge Blog, which appears to be posited on the believe that effective scholarly communication can take place on blogs. As one of the founders of this JISC-funded experiment Phil Lord has asked, "Why does the second largest STM publisher cost \$1,000 million per annum, while the largest costs \$10 million? These are Elsevier and Wikipedia respectively."

Finally, you say that the peer review process improves the quality of the final product, and that "manuscripts are rarely published as they are originally submitted". I have no reason to doubt that manuscripts are changed during the peer review process, but exactly how often that leads to an improvement in quality is not clear to me.

Consider for instance this paper, published in PLoS ONE in 2008. Read the abstract to the paper and assess for yourself the degree of copyediting that must have taken place.

Consider also that when I drew the paper to the attention of both PLoS ONE and the academic editor everyone agreed that the quality of the copy-editing was unacceptable. Yet, over two years after I first contacted PLoS ONE no attempt appears to have been made to improve it.

I also published an article on PLoS ONE in which I drew attention to this particular paper, an article that was cited by a UK House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee Inquiry into peer review earlier this year.

During the Inquiry the Committee called in PLoS ONE's Mark Patterson to give evidence, during which they raised the issue of quality with him. He replied, "In our production process we focus on delivering really well structured files that will be computable, for example. We don't expend effort in changing the narrative. Scientific articles aren't works of literature. That is not to say it wouldn't be nice if, sometimes, a bit more attention was paid to that. It is also true that one of the criteria for PLoS ONE is that the work is in intelligible English. If an editor or reviewer thinks that something is just not good enough and they can't really see what is happening, it will be returned to the author."

So why was this paper not sent back to the author with the instruction to make it more intelligible during the review process, and why was it not corrected when the problem was subsequently drawn to the attention of PLoS ONE and the academic author? What exactly are authors getting for the \$1,350 article-processing charge that PLoS ONE demands? A DOI and an XML file?

Of course this is just one paper published by one publisher, but it inevitably leaves one wondering about the relationship between cost and quality in scholarly publishing today.

September 18, 2011 10:07 am

David Solomon said...

Richard,

On your first point, I was referring only to the cost of review from the publishing perspective. The cost of effort of the reviewers, editor and the additional effort of the authors is another issue. Clearly it is very substantial. I am not sure if it is worth the cost but personally feel in many cases it is when peer review is done well. That is not to say it is required for effective scholarly communication. I just think the result is a better end product.

I am probably old fashion but I feel good quality copyediting is also worth the cost. Not just proofing but having someone who is a good writer edit and clean up the language so the meaning is clear. The APC for our journal is \$800 and about \$120 of that goes for copyediting but the copy editor is superb and earns what she charges.

There is a wonderful article that was written by two educational researchers in 1995 concerning how they thought digital publication was going to change scholarship. I have always liked the following quote.

"the care and precision of proofreading, revision, editing, designing, and typesetting manuscripts to create an authoritative (and aesthetically appealing) version of an author or authors' document has traditionally been linked with the finality of creating a printed, bound version that will be archived as such for posterity. Both the producer of the text and its editor and publisher have a common interest in seeing it as complete, persuasive and carefully written as possible, since there is a sense in which, once published, there is no taking it back. The printed medium, therefore, also has distinct benefits." (pp 15-16)

Burbules NC, Bruce BC. This is not a paper. Educatonal Researcher 1995;24(8):12-8.

Maybe we no longer have the money to spend on these ancillary costs but as much as I love what we have gained in digital publishing I think Burbules and Bruce have a point that something has been lost.

September 18, 2011 7:48 pm 📆



Richard Poynder said...

The APC for our journal is \$800 and about \$120 of that goes for copyediting but the copy editor is superb and earns what she charges.

Thank you very much for sharing this with us David. I wonder if it is possible for you to say how the remainder of the \$800 APC is accounted for?

Richard

September 19, 2011 6:54 pm

David Solomon said...

Richard.

Co-Action Publishing publishes the journal. Beyond copy editing, their costs include fees for maintaining the web site and OJS; archiving; typesetting and generating the various versions (HTML, PDF, EPUB, XML), assigning DOIs and getting the metadata into a number of indexes such as PubMed; providing support for authors, reviewers and editors (OJS can be confusing) and their salaries for running the whole process.

I know the folks at Co-Action quite well and they work very hard and deserve to earn a living. Before Co-Action took over I spent a lot of time running the journal beyond the editorial work and could not do anywhere near as good a job. They are publishing professionals with decades of experience. I was not.

I do not like the fact it cost \$800 to publish in Medical Education Online but I do not think it is an unreasonable fee for the work that goes into to publishing the journal.

Thanks.

Dave

September 20, 2011 5:28 am

Anonymous said...

I just learned of your service today, and like many, I have some concerns about the lack of any pre-review and quality control.

One way to help address the concern about the public mistaking a postreview and a pre-peer reviewed papers would be to automatically append a pre-article paragraph, a post-article paragarph, and perhaps a header and footer on every page indicating that readers should see the post publication reviews and remind them that there was no prepublication peer review.

Secondly, and perhaps more dramatically, the title of the publication should be changed so that even a high school term paper citing the article will include citation to, for example, "WebMedCentral Journal of Post-Reviewed Research"

Such measures may at least help to mitigate the fear that some authors, advocates, or companies may cite "published medical research" that was not carefully reviewed prior to publication.

January 25, 2013 4:50 pm 🛅

Kamal Mahawar said...

"Thanks for your comments. I agree quality of publications is an issue but I feel the false assurance of quality by giving it a seal of approval, when every work is actually science in progress, is a bigger issue. As I have said before, publication of poor quality articles stems from too much emphasis on the act of publications and not on the end for which they are meant. You remove the emphasis from publications and develop other metrics to gauge the proficiency of academicians and universities and no scientist will ever publish a substandard article. By erecting more barriers in the path of publication, we are not only making the process more cumbersome and costly, a cost which someone has to bear, we are also making it a sought after commodity and artificially increasing its price.

At WebmedCentral, we have taken multiple steps to improve the quality of articles and reviews on our portal. Now, scientists have to pay a minimum amount to publish an article, unless they are reviewing with us. Reviews are screened before publishing and reviewers are allowed to stay anonymous if they wish. These and other steps have led to a visible improvement in quality of articles and reviews, even though it has meant that the number of articles published has been lower than what we expected. We are confident that gradually the quality will improve further as there would be no incentive to publish poor quality stuff in your name on a portal which publishes everything after basic screening.

I agree with you that all content on the internet should be clearly tagged. That is why every article and pdf on our website carries a clear disclaimer stating that articles have not undergone any prepublication reviews. In fact, I would go a step further, I would say that journals following peer review policies that are different to the standard should also attach their peer review policies with each published article so that users know that all reviewers have sometimes checked is that the manuscript is a scientific work and not self contradictory. It should be made clear if reviewers had access to raw data and whether they have or have not verified the results for themselves. I think it is only then that we will be exploring the real value of peer review and of course such peer review would require considerable effort and will have to be openly acknowledged. Whether it happens before or after publication is immaterial in that sense. Though, I feel doing it after publication would clearly be better. But, we have to live with what we have got and hence we are coming up with WebmedCentral plus to cater to scientists who have to publish on pre publication platform for reasons of personal belief or career needs.

It was my impression that "gray" literature gets cited all the time in academic literature alongside "carefully" reviewed literature. We all also know that the quality of peer reviewed literature varies from journal to journal and article to article too. In this age of "article processing charges", it is not too difficult to find a journal that will ultimately publish

anything albeit after considerable frustrations, rejections, and delays, in the name of peer reviewed literature." I feel the scientific community needs to move away from the mindset that material published after "pre publication peer review" is all truth and rest is not. This false belief in a system that can never verify authenticity of research causes more problems than having a questioning mind towards every research published anywhere, irrespective of whether it has gone through peer review or not. These tragedies are now common place when research fraud is getting detected after "publication" of research. I can give you several examples and I am sure so can you. Why do researchers do it? Because, we have made "publication" an end in itself!

Kind regards,

Kamal Mahawar

January 28, 2013 9:56 pm 🛅

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